‘We can send men to the moon but we can’t invent a photocopier that reliably duplexes!’ I muttered, as I stood helplessly at the blinking machine while the bell for period two was ringing in my ears. This was, for me, further if superfluous proof that, at their core, photocopiers are deeply malevolent towards teachers.

Now, it’s hard to sound anything but conspiratorial about this theory of mine, but it seems obvious to me that there is a design in all of this, and I think the original perpetrators were our school administrative assistants back in the late 1970s.

My proposition is simple: machines that teachers use don’t generally work well. In fact, the more crucial they are to your job, the less likely they are to work. It also doesn’t help that we complain about the things that don’t work either. This is just free market research for the designers of these foul devices about the kinds of things that won’t work that they might like to work on next.

You see, back in the heady days of the 1970s, teachers were about as savvy with technology as your average meatworker is familiar with neurosurgery, and teachers relied on secretarial staff to do all kinds of things, like – and I know this might be hard to imagine if you’re a younger teacher – write letters and type newsletters, for example.

Well, according to my conspiracy theory, the spectre of teachers learning to use desktop publishing with personal computers loomed large over the essential workers at the nerve centre of our schools – the administrative assistants slaving over Olivetti golf-ball machines with gallons of Tipp-Ex on standby.

Of course, I have no direct proof, but the circumstantial evidence suggests that it was in the 1970s that these essential workers entered into secret pacts with photocopier manufacturers to ensure their mutual economic survival. Think about it: now, the only people with the knowledge, power and inclination to be photocopier-whisperers are your administrative staff, or, if you’re really stuck, contract photocopier service personnel.

This latter group is the only class of worker that becomes more invisible to regular teaching staff than contract supply teachers. The understandable resentment that stems from this may well explain why they experience no moral dilemma with temporarily fixing these evil machines, knowing full well that most of their repairs will last, at best, until they can get their van to the nearest fastfood drive-through for a burger.

Photocopiers, according to my conspiracy theory, have for some time now had circuits built in which detect urgency and the emotional stress of the person using the machine. A simple measurement of galvanic skin response on that deceptively friendly green button is all it takes to sense that the job being done must be completed immediately. Here, years of research and development on artificial intelligence allows the photocopier to create a suitable jam or error message, or else print your copy back to front in perfect Esperanto in order to maintain the appropriate political hierarchy – that’s the one with frazzled teachers on the very bottom of the pile, well, okay, technically near the very bottom of the pile, just above contract supply teachers.

Our administrative assistants are, once again, indispensable; our photocopier technicians get to holiday in the Greek Isles and the general public is convinced that teachers are burnt out from behaviour management issues with students. Who do you think sends out the press releases to newspapers, the teachers?

This month’s Last Word was written by Mick Wilkinson, the Student Activities Coordinator, Student Services, at Northside Christian College, Brisbane, but he has been unable to obtain a copy, since the machines he has so far attempted to use all display a ‘warming up’ message.

Photo by Leandro Frasson courtesy of stock.xchng